STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 73 | Number 3 (Summer 2014) pps. 273-274

Dakota Prisoner of War Letters: Dakota Kaŝkapi Okicize Wowapi

Thomas Maroukis
Capitol University

ISSN 0003-4827

Dakota Prisoner of War Letters: Dakota Kaŝkapi Okicize Wowapi, by Clifford Canku and Michael Simon, with an introduction by John Peacock. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2014. xxx, 225 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. $27.95 paperback.

Reviewer Thomas Maroukis is professor of history at Capital University, Columbus, Ohio. He is the author of *Peyote and the Yankton Sioux* (2004) and *The Peyote Road: Religious Freedom and the Native American Church* (2010).

The introduction to this volume by John Peacock (Spirit Lake Dakota) describes the largest mass execution in American history, when 38 Dakota men were hanged for participating in the Dakota–U.S. War of 1862. The 270 others who were also condemned to death but had their sentences commuted by President Lincoln were sent from Mankato, Minnesota, to prison at Camp Kearney, in Davenport, Iowa, for three years. Davenport was chosen because Camp McClellan was an available facility with a military presence. Camp Kearney was built inside the fort. The letters in this volume are from those prisoners.

The Minnesota Historical Society holds 150 of these letters; 50 are translated here by two experienced translators, both native Dakota speakers and enrolled members of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate [Nation]. Clifford Canku, coauthor of *Beginning Dakota* (2010), is director of Dakota studies at North Dakota State University and teaches Dakota. Michael Simon teaches Dakota in the Moorhead (Minnesota) public schools.

This volume is a significant contribution to the publication of native voices. The letters were originally sent to missionaries Stephen Riggs and John Williamson, who ministered to the prisoners, for distribution to families and seeking information about their families. Some of the prisoners already knew how to write; Riggs taught others. Riggs was a Dakota scholar who published a Dakota grammar and dictionary and used his knowledge of the language to try to Christianize the Dakota.

After two unsuccessful attempts to complete the translation of the letters, North Dakota State University in 2009 funded the new translations that led to the present volume. The format of the translations is on a par with the best of modern translations. There are five parts. The left page is trilineal: the first line is word-for-word Dakota; the second line is word-for-word literal translation to English; and the third line is English translation in sentence form. On the right page is the full Dakota text of the letter, with the modern English translation beneath. This format will allow future scholars to assess the accuracy of the translations.

The letters help fill a void of native voices from this tragic era. In addition to the longing for their families and their release, the letters describe the hardships of the internment. The Dakota prisoners were not treated as prisoners of war but as criminals: there was insufficient food and poor sanitation; they were mistreated by the guards, often kept in chains, and suffered deaths from smallpox and measles. Residents in Davenport were allowed to view the prisoners as if the camp was a zoo. Some prisoners were allowed to work for Davenport residents on nearby farms; some residents, however, complained of their presence. With the end of the Civil War, Camp McClellan was no longer needed. In May 1866 the prisoners were released. In 1867 the government established Fort Traverse Reservation, where the prisoners, their families, and other Dakota were relocated.

The letters are more than historic documents. They are treated as sacred texts to honor and memorialize the spirits of the prisoners. The memory of these events is part of today's oral tradition among the Dakota. There is a yearly commemorative march. The translations will be valuable in rewriting the history of the era since most sources are from non-Indians. A strong point is that the English translations carry the cadence of Dakota; Dakota speakers, for example, end many sentences with "do" or "it is so," as in "I want you to help me with this—it is so" (51). The repetition captures the cadence of the language. The only element missing is a bibliography. There are some references in the notes, but a brief bibliography would have been helpful. Also, the excellent article by Sarah-Eva Ellen Carlson on the Davenport internment that was published in the *Annals of Iowa* (Summer 2004) is not mentioned.

The Jury in Lincoln's America, by Stacy Pratt McDermott. Ohio University Press Series on Law, Society, and Politics in the Midwest. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012. xiv, 258 pp. Chart, illustrations, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. $54.95 hardcover.

Reviewer David J. Bodenhamer is professor of history and executive director of The Polis Center at Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis. His publications include *Fair Trial: Rights of the Accused in American History* (1992).

Trial by a jury of one's peers was a bedrock principle of English law long before the colonial period, and during the American Revolution the alleged abuse of this guarantee defined the scale of British tyranny for many alarmed colonists. Enshrined in the revolutionary state constitutions and the U.S. Constitution, with renewed emphasis in the Bill of Rights, the jury quickly became an emblem of American commitment